



NEWSLETTER

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TURPENTINE AND RICE IN BRUNSWICK COUNTY

In 1855 D.L. Russell of Brunswick County was the largest maker of turpentine in the Cape Fear region except the Green Swamp Company. He owned some 25,000 acres and had a force of 150 hands. He also had a thousand acres in cultivation half of which was in corn, the rest in other food crops, and in cotton, for he attempted to make his plantation self-sustaining. But turpentine was his chief concern and he usually cleared about \$25,000 a year.

The routine on a turpentine plantation was regulated by the task system. The task for a prime hand was from 450 to 500 boxes a week, or 75 to 80 a day. Expert hands could work faster than this and were usually encouraged to do so by being paid for extra boxes. A beginner would do well to cut fifty boxes a day, and the judicious planter did not assign him more work than this, for the most important part of the whole process was in having the boxes well and properly cut.

Cutting boxes began about the first of November and continued until the first or middle of March. A well-cut box was from eight to fifteen inches long with a smooth lower rim, having a slope inward of two or three inches in order to hold about a quart of "drip". As soon as the boxes were cut, each task was marked off by blazing a line of trees. The task was divided further by rows of stakes fifty yards apart, cutting the task into squares of about half an acre so that the hand could proceed without skipping any trees and the driver or overseer could inspect the work accurately.

Brunswick was the chief rice growing county in the State, having produced almost seven million pounds in 1860. New Hanover, Columbus, Bladen, Robeson, Sampson, Duplin, Pitt and a few neighboring counties were also raising rice in increasing quantities. The work, roimitive and laborious, was accomplished by the task system. Ditches divided the fields into "tasks" of a quarter of an acre. In March, hands prepared the fields with the hoe and dug trenches for the seeds. From that time until the harvest in September, they were busy alternately flooding the growing rice and clearing the fields of grass. In addition, there were ditches to be dug, trunks to be mended, flood gates to be kept in repair, a routine which kept the slaves for long hours in wet fields. The nature of the work and the prevalence of malaria in this region made the rice plantations of the lowlands almost prohibitive for white labor and also caused considerable sickness among the slaves. Hands cut the ripe rice with a sickle, exposed in the fields for a day. Then shocked it, and in colonial times pounded out the grain with a pestle in a deep mortar. By the beginning of the ante-bellum period rice planters began to obtain mills for this purpose. The final process of winnowing, sifting and polishing might also be done by mechanical power, but late in the ante-bellum period some of this work was still being done by hand. In 1775 Miss Janet Schaw of Scotland thought the labor required for the cultivation of rice "fit only for slaves, and I think the hardest work I have seen them engaged in."

Ante-Bellum North Carolina, pp.487 & 488

by Guion Griffis Johnson

The U. N. C. Press, 1937

SALT IN COLONIAL BRUNSWICK

When Bishop Spangenburg of the Moravian church was searching for a favorable location in 1752, he noted that the settlers "will require salt & other necessities," and traced the routes they would have to travel to obtain these. One wad down the river - "I know not how many miles - where salt is brought up from the Cape Fear." The Bishop was referring to the salt brought as cargo or ship ballast from Europe and the Caribbean, and unloaded at the port of Brunswick. The first permanent residents of the Lower Cape Fear had arrived in the second decade of the 1700s. By this time trade between Europe, the West Indies and America was well established, and Brunswick Town on the west bank of the river quickly became the shipping center for southeastern North Carolina. A few of the inhabitants may have made salt for home use; there was little need to make salt for distribution, since it was cheap and came regularly and in quantity in the merchant ships. At the time Brunswick was established, the chief governing body of North Carolina was the Provincial Council, whose members were appointed by the King on the recommendation of the royal governor. To encourage the importation of salt, the Provincial Council enacted laws as early as 1715. An act, signed by Edward Moseley, then President of the Council and later one of the largest landholders on the Cape Fear River, provided:

Vessels as shall Import into this Government at one time the full quantity of Four Hundred Bushels of Salt ... shall not be liable to pay the said Powder, Shot or Flint for that Voyage.

In the 1750s the trade prohibitions, which Great Britain forced upon the colonies, threatened to affect the supply of salt. Arthur Dobbs, then the Colonial Governor of North Carolina, wrote to the British Board of Trade in 1755:

The Prohibition of the Trade of Salt from all Parts of Europe except Britain, to this & the southern Provinces ... is a considerable Drawback upon our Trade. The English Salt is not found so good, as the French, Spanish or Portuguese in curing our Pork & Beef Limitations of this Trade obliges us to take that Salt at great Disadvantage from New York and Pemsyvania at double freight and a further advanced Price to the Northern Importers.

Enclosed with this letter was a further protest signed among others by Samuel Swann, John Ashe, and Cornelius Harnett, important men of this area. They stated that the prohibition "of taking salt fram any port in Europe, except from Britian, to any of the Provinces South of Delaware" demkstrated "an inconceivable prejudice to the Trade of the Province. Unfortunately there are no import records extant from the Port of Brunswick until 1773, but during that

year and the next, vessels brought salt only from the British ports of Liverpool, Bristol and Southampton, from the northern American ports of Boston and Philadelphia, and from the Caribbean Islands: Tobago, Hispaniola, Montego Bay and Turk's Island.

During the 1760s many of the commodities imported at Brunswick and Wilmington were sent up the river to Cross Creek, the present Fayetteville, which became a supply point for immigrants groups settling the interior of North Carolina. The Moravians, for example, came regularly from Salem to Cross Creek for their supplies.

Apart from the very occasional shipments from Bethlehem we had been dependent on what would be secured from Springhill, a storehouse which had been built on the Cape Fear River, to which flatbottomed boats brought some supplies from the harbor at Brunswick. To Springhill(later known as Cross Creek and then Fayetteville) our wagons took flour , and brought back salt and whatever else could be found there.

By the end of that decade tax records indicate that only slightly more and 500 families inhabited New Hanover and Brunswick Counties, and the amount of salt imported was far greater than the needs of this handful of people. The shipping register of 1774, probably representative of later colonial years, indicates that in the last half of that year more than 33,000 bushels of salt were imported through the Port of Brunswick alone. Some ships carried it as their sole cargo, bringing in over 5,000 at a time. A great deal of salt was transported to Cross Creek. From Cross Creek it was distributed to the hog raisers, to the dairy farmers of Halifax and Cross Creek, and to the Scottish Highlanders of Cumberland and Ansin Counties, who raised beef. These farmers were carrying on a brisk trade, again through Cross Creek and Brunswick, shipping barrels of salt beef, salt pork, butter and cheese.

-SALT: THAT NECESSARY ARTICLE 1-3
by Isabel M. Williams & Leora H. McEachern
Louis T. Moore Memorial Fund
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